
**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**U.S. NUCLEAR
REGULATORY COMMISSION**

Review of NRC's Workforce Planning

OIG-01-A-15 September 17, 2001

AUDIT REPORT



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September 17, 2001

MEMORANDUM TO: William D. Travers
Executive Director for Operations

FROM: Stephen D. Dingbaum/**RA**/
Assistant Inspector General for Audits

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF NRC'S WORKFORCE PLANNING (OIG-01-A-15)

Attached is the Office of the Inspector General's audit report titled, *Review of NRC's Workforce Planning*.

This report reflects the results of OIG's review of the agency's workforce planning efforts. Overall, we found that NRC is making a concerted effort to strengthen its approach to workforce planning; however, the agency lacks a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan. As a result, NRC needs to take further steps to integrate, communicate, and institutionalize its agencywide workforce planning efforts.

At an exit conference on September 6, 2001, NRC officials generally agreed with the report's findings and recommendations. While NRC officials chose not to provide a formal, written response for inclusion in the report, they did provide editorial suggestions, which were incorporated where appropriate.

If you have any questions, please contact Corenthis Kelley at 415-5977 or me at 415-5915.

Attachment: As stated

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

One of the most serious management challenges facing the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is the maintenance of a highly competent staff to carry out the agency's public health and safety mission. This effort, known as workforce planning, is a systematic process for identifying the human capital required to meet organizational goals and for developing strategies to meet those requirements. Ultimately, workforce planning should provide managers with a framework for making staffing decisions based on the organization's mission, strategic plan, budgetary resources, and desired workforce competencies.

About 15 percent of NRC's staff is eligible to retire; the percentage of retirement eligibles is 20 percent or greater in some of the technical offices.

PURPOSE

The objectives of this audit were to determine (1) whether NRC has the requisite resources and senior management support to carry out and sustain a successful workforce planning effort, and (2) whether NRC has an agencywide workforce plan that will ensure the agency has the necessary staff to continue to meet its safety mission.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

NRC is making a concerted effort to strengthen its approach to workforce planning; however, the agency lacks a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan. That is, NRC has not yet fully integrated workforce planning in its budget process, communicated its approach throughout the agency, or institutionalized its efforts in a holistic plan that coordinates the various efforts underway. Until this occurs, NRC is placing the future of its workforce planning efforts at risk and could potentially jeopardize the agency's ability to maintain the workforce needed to meet its mission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report makes five recommendations to the Executive Director for Operations to integrate, communicate, and institutionalize workforce planning at NRC.

AGENCY COMMENTS

At an exit conference on September 6, 2001, NRC officials stated general agreement with the report's findings and recommendations. While NRC officials chose not to provide a formal written response for inclusion in the report, they did provide editorial suggestions, which were incorporated where appropriate.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
ERB	Executive Resources Board
FY	fiscal year
GAO	U.S. General Accounting Office
HR	Office of Human Resources
NAPA	National Academy of Public Administration
NRC	U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
NTEU	National Treasury Employees Union
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OPM	U.S. Office of Personnel Management
PBPM	planning, budgeting, and performance management

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I. BACKGROUND

As identified by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) Inspector General, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), and the NRC Chairman and other senior managers, one of the most serious management challenges facing the agency is the maintenance of a highly competent staff to carry out the agency's public health and safety mission. This effort, known as "human capital management" or "strategic workforce planning," is defined by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA)¹ as a systematic process for identifying the human capital required to meet organizational goals and for developing the strategies to meet these requirements.² Ultimately, workforce planning should provide managers with a framework for making staffing decisions based on the organization's mission, strategic plan, budgetary resources, and desired workforce competencies. Workforce planning is fundamental to strategic business management.

Demographics and External Factors

Although NRC's demographics and changes in educational opportunities for nuclear-related professions have brought this challenge into the spotlight at the agency, this issue is not unique to NRC. According to a recent GAO report on human capital management,³ human capital shortfalls are eroding the ability of many agencies — and threatening the ability of others — to effectively, efficiently, and economically perform their missions. With regard to NRC specifically, GAO noted that the agency's ability to maintain the skills needed to achieve its mission and fill the gaps created by growing retirement eligibles could be threatened by the decline in university enrollments in nuclear engineering and other fields related to nuclear safety. About 15 percent of NRC's staff is eligible to retire in fiscal year (FY) 2001 with the percentage of retirement eligibles greater in some of the agency's technical offices. Over the past 5 years, NRC employees retired, on average, about 4.5 years after becoming eligible to retire. See the following table for retirement profile information about NRC overall, regional offices, and specific headquarters offices.

¹*Building Successful Organizations: A Guide to Strategic Workforce Planning*, National Academy of Public Administration, Center for Human Resources Management, May, 2000.

²For purposes of this report, OIG uses the term "workforce planning."

³GAO-01-263 High-Risk Update, *Strategic Human Capital Management: A Governmentwide High-Risk Area*, January 2001.

**Table. Retirement Profile for NRC Overall, Regional Offices,
and Selected Headquarters Offices**
(Data as of 07/31/01)

Organizational Component	FTE Ceiling (Full-time equivalent)	Staff Eligible for Retirement					
		FY 2001		FY 2003		FY 2005	
		count	percent	count	percent	count	percent
NRC Overall	2,776	403	15	621	22	859	31
Region I	214	18	8	36	17	56	26
Region II	197	18	9	35	18	44	22
Region III	203	15	7	27	13	42	21
Region IV	165	16	10	25	15	39	23
Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation	580	121	21	160	28	209	37
Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards	343	39	11	62	18	94	28
Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research	180	44	24	67	36	83	45
Notes: Permanent Appointments Only Eligibility as of 9/30 of Fiscal Year Out Year Percentages Based on FY 2002 FTE Ceilings Eligibility Figures are Cumulative							

Past and Present Workforce Planning Efforts

Today, NRC participates in a variety of workforce planning initiatives, some of which have been ongoing for a number of years and others which are either new or have been rejuvenated from prior efforts. These workforce planning efforts

include recruitment and retention strategies, training opportunities, succession planning initiatives, and work environment improvements.

NRC has also experienced some pauses over the years in its agencywide workforce planning efforts. In 1997, agency staff provided the NRC Chairman and Commissioners (the Commission) with a preliminary action plan for projecting and maintaining skills requirements, availability, and staffing. The plan included a process for developing baseline assessment data regarding core capabilities needed to carry out fundamental agency functions. While the Commission approved this plan, it found it too complex and requested that the staff consider a simpler approach. In 1998, the agency staff responded with an alternative approach to identifying core capabilities and a preliminary schedule for implementation. Also in 1998, the agency staff provided a methodology for assessing the availability of technical skills at the NRC. However, by 1999, the staff had reconsidered its conceptual basis of the core competency requirements model and its process for identifying core skills in favor of approaches for addressing skill needs in individual office and regional operating plans.

In October 2000, in response to NRC's aging workforce with a high retirement eligibility among the technical staff, Chairman Meserve identified the need for a holistic workforce planning effort. He tasked the staff to provide a plan to the Commission by the end of January 2001 to assess and maintain the agency's scientific, engineering, and technical core competencies. To address the Chairman's request, the agency entered into a contractual arrangement with Arthur Andersen LLP.⁴ Through this effort, facilitated by the Office of Human Resources (HR), the agency developed and is working through an action plan for maintaining core competence. This effort is currently focused on conducting a gap analysis. That is, NRC will identify what skills it has — its bench strength — against what skills it will need and then address the gaps. The agency is in the early stage of this effort and, in June 2001, pilot tested a survey instrument in three branches within the Offices of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards, and Nuclear Regulatory Research. HR will be meeting with its contractor to develop a lessons learned from the pilot survey. The intent is to eventually roll out the survey agencywide, collect the data, store it in an electronic database, and update it on a regular basis. A key HR official does not expect this effort to yield agencywide results for about a year.

Chairman Meserve told the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) audit team that he is supportive of HR's gap analysis effort, but that when he tasked the staff to develop an action plan, he had anticipated more concrete measures for

⁴NRC's delivery/task order under General Services Administration contract GS-15F-0056K with Arthur Andersen is currently scheduled to end on September 30, 2001.

addressing NRC's current needs. As a result, he has been meeting periodically with the senior managers involved with the assessment of technical core competencies to facilitate specific actions. While the Chairman stated that he intends to continue meeting with the senior managers, he said that NRC now has management's attention at the highest levels, a sense of the significance of the issue, and a process for workforce planning.

HR has undertaken other actions to strengthen NRC's approach to workforce planning as well. For example, HR officials have met with the major program office directors to discuss their workforce planning needs and plot out strategies to address those needs. HR strengthened its recruitment program by bringing in new staff to focus on recruitment strategies and is moving towards the implementation of an online system for soliciting and responding to job applicants. The office developed and submitted an agencywide budget request for human capital initiatives. Other activities include expanding NRC's student intern program and seeking and receiving permission from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for NRC to waive the dual compensation reduction to hire Federal retirees in certain situations.

II. PURPOSE

The objectives of this audit were to determine (1) whether NRC has the requisite resources and senior management support to carry out and sustain a successful workforce planning effort, and (2) whether NRC has an agencywide workforce plan that will ensure the agency has the necessary staff to continue to meet its safety mission. Appendix A contains the scope and methodology of this review.

III. FINDING

WORKFORCE PLANNING NEEDS TO BE FULLY INTEGRATED, COMMUNICATED, AND INSTITUTIONALIZED

NRC is making a concerted effort to strengthen its approach to workforce planning; however, the agency lacks a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan. That is, NRC has not yet fully integrated workforce planning in its budget process, communicated its approach throughout the agency, or institutionalized its efforts in a holistic plan that coordinates the various efforts underway. Until this occurs, NRC is placing the future of its workforce planning efforts at risk and could potentially jeopardize the agency's ability to maintain the workforce needed to meet its mission.

NRC's Focus on Workforce Planning

Senior managers play a vital role in workforce planning. They are responsible for recognizing the need for workforce planning, demonstrating a commitment to it, providing the resources to make it happen, and communicating the agency's shared vision. Effective workforce planning requires senior managers to continually monitor and refine the agency's workforce planning approach to ensure ongoing effectiveness and continuous improvement.

As noted in the "Background" section of this report, NRC senior managers have demonstrated support for workforce planning as evidenced by:

- ✓ The Chairman's October 2000 call for an action plan to maintain core competence and his meetings with NRC officials concerning specific actions to address gaps already identified.
- ✓ HR officials' meetings with the major program office directors to discuss their workforce planning needs and plot out strategies to meet the needs.
- ✓ HR's development and submission of an agencywide workforce planning budget, which the Chairman and Commission approved, and other specific measures undertaken by HR to strengthen workforce planning.

In addition, NRC office directors and regional administrators have been pursuing some workforce planning initiatives on their own for the past several years. For example, some program offices and each regional office conduct their own skills surveys and gap analyses to assess staffing needs and devise solutions. Other workforce planning initiatives include (1) providing tuition reimbursement for college courses, (2) paying attention to the needs and concerns of recent hires to facilitate a smooth transition to NRC employment, (3) formal training programs for interns, (4) formal programs to develop agency managers, (5) establishing relationships with colleges and universities as a recruitment strategy, (6) mandatory training plans that staff and managers develop and adhere to, and (7) focused diversity recruiting. In addition, individual office efforts include mentoring programs for new staff, the establishment of a diversity panel to serve as a forum to which staff can raise issues, an initiative for staff empowerment, focused training plans, and the use of rotational assignments.

NRC's Chairman, Commissioners, and senior managers continue to exhibit high interest and involvement in workforce planning issues. For example, several senior managers recently participated in a recruitment trip to the University of Mayaguez in Puerto Rico. During this trip, the agency made 26 job offers for technical, entry level positions. Of the 26 offers, 12 were accepted; all acceptors were Hispanic and 5 were female. NRC senior managers expressed their

satisfaction regarding the success of this particular recruitment effort, but senior managers recognize the need for continued emphasis with regard to staff diversity. Such focus on diversity is an integral part of the agency's corporate management strategy to "sustain a high-performing, diverse workforce."

While NRC has many individual projects underway, more needs to be done for NRC to have a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan.

Workforce Planning Not Fully Integrated in Budget Process

Workforce planning should be linked to the agency's strategic plan and budget because resource investment is critical for success. This linkage helps to ensure that workforce planning becomes a routine consideration in the way an agency conducts business.

NRC senior management is committing resources to workforce planning and indicates that NRC intends to integrate workforce planning into its planning, budgeting, and performance management (PBPM) process for FY 2004. The PBPM process includes the following four basic cycles:

- ✓ Setting strategic direction.
- ✓ Determining resources and planning accomplishments.
- ✓ Measuring and monitoring performance.
- ✓ Assessing performance.

HR is currently participating in a contractor facilitated process so that the agency can begin integrating its workforce planning efforts with the PBPM process. In addition, the agency's FY 2002 and proposed FY 2003 budgets contain funding (\$4 million and \$4.7 million, respectively) to support a variety of workforce planning initiatives (e.g., recruitment and retention bonuses). HR is trying to move NRC to an agencywide workforce planning budget with initiatives and programs spanning the agency. However, several NRC offices and regions are still more focused on and have budgeted for their individual workforce planning needs. It will take senior management emphasis to create a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan (Recommendation 1).

Currently, there are several output measures that are related to the workforce planning effort included in the agency's performance plan. However, additional measures are needed to help the agency assess its progress in achieving specific workforce planning goals. According to the agency's strategic plan for FY 2000 through FY 2005, the next strategic plan will contain measures for NRC's corporate management strategy to "sustain a high-performing, diverse workforce." However, the next plan is not due until 2003 (Recommendation 2).

Mission goals affect the entire agency and senior managers are responsible for involving employees both directly and through their employee organizations in workforce planning efforts. Staff must be fully aware of the benefits of workforce planning.

NRC senior managers recognize the need for workforce planning and have committed the resources; however, they have no formal mechanism for communicating workforce planning goals and initiatives below the senior management level. For example, an announcement has not been sent to the entire NRC workforce concerning the agency's shared vision for workforce planning. One Commissioner observed that NRC employees may not be aware of specific workforce planning information such as the use of retention bonuses.

In moving forward with the gap analysis pilot survey instrument, HR met with survey participants to explain how the data would be used. HR also involved the local chapter of the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) when the pilot survey instrument was ready for roll-out. NTEU representatives attended participant meetings with HR and endorsed the survey instrument. However, NTEU leaders shared their belief with the OIG audit team that, while the gap analysis pilot may yield beneficial results for union membership, they are concerned about NRC workforce planning efforts. NTEU leaders also conveyed their wish that the agency more actively include them early on with workforce planning efforts.

NRC has a communications plan focused on the gap analysis survey. The agency is generally following the plan, but some action items have been delayed due to changes in the agreement with NRC's workforce planning contractor. For example, the gap analysis pilot survey was administered to about 90 staff members in June. At the time this report was written, participants had not received feedback from HR as to the results or success of the pilot test. However, at the audit exit conference on September 6, 2001, agency officials told OIG that a feedback session is scheduled for September 11. Senior management should continue to take steps to assure the staff is fully aware of the benefits of workforce planning (Recommendation 3).

Workforce Planning Not Institutionalized in Holistic Plan

Noted leaders in the provision of Federal workforce planning guidance — NAPA, GAO, and OPM — propose similar themes in terms of the need for and components of a workforce plan (see Appendix B for NAPA's list). These themes include the need to involve a multidisciplinary team of agency employees

in developing an explicit workforce plan, which includes performance measures to indicate whether goals are being achieved.

While there are numerous promising workforce planning measures already underway — some in their initial stages — at NRC, there is no assurance that the current agencywide workforce planning effort promises to be a lasting one. First, there is no indication that NRC has an overarching agencywide plan for workforce planning. Such a plan would help to coordinate the effort and ensure continuation and assessment of the numerous workforce planning activities underway. NRC does have a number of documents that reflect pieces of NRC's workforce planning philosophy — including the (1) agency's strategic plan for FY 2000 through FY 2005, (2) agency's action plan for maintaining core competence that was developed in response to the Chairman's call for such a plan, (3) briefing documents for the Commission and Chairman, (4) communications plan that corresponds to the gap analysis survey, (5) individual office operating plans, and (6) NRC Management Directives. However, these documents do not reflect an overall approach to workforce planning, but, rather, describe various aspects of it. In addition to these written documents, various NRC officials described their own vision and plans related to workforce planning, but these are not necessarily reflected in an overall plan. For example, it is not yet clear when and how gap analysis data will be incorporated into the agency's recruiting efforts, which currently rely on a separate data analysis effort. Senior managers need to ensure these efforts are coordinated through a comprehensive, agencywide workforce plan (Recommendation 4). At the audit exit conference, agency officials told OIG that following the pilot gap analysis effort currently underway, an agencywide implementation plan will be developed to help coordinate the effort and ensure continuation and assessment of the numerous workforce planning activities underway.

Second, NRC has not created a multidisciplinary group to help promote workforce planning, facilitate sharing of information across office lines, and ensure continued involvement and commitment to the effort. For the recent, Chairman-initiated workforce planning efforts, HR managers served as the gatherers and compilers of information concerning the major program office workforce planning needs. And, while senior managers report that they share information with each other informally, they said there is no formal mechanism to facilitate the sharing of office initiatives, techniques, and lessons learned.

During the course of this audit, OIG contacted several Federal agencies to learn about their workforce planning efforts. Representatives from these agencies expressed the need to obtain buy-in for workforce planning efforts. One agency, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), developed an internal workforce planning strategy document based on input from a multidisciplinary

team. This document lays out specific workforce planning goals, strategies to accomplish the goals, and responsible parties.

While it requires more than just a plan to ensure that an agency accomplishes its workforce planning goals, the EPA document and methodology for its development seem well aligned with the document's assertion that high performing organizations require that everyone take ownership for human resources. According to EPA, its workforce planning strategy is not an event, but an ongoing campaign. Likewise, NRC would benefit from a multidisciplinary team or steering committee that helps direct and coordinate agency workforce planning activities (Recommendation 5). At the audit exit conference, agency officials told OIG that NRC currently uses its Executive Resources Board (ERB) to address workforce planning issues, and intends to use this group to help promote workforce planning.

Summary

Drivers behind NRC's current agencywide workforce planning effort include demographic data concerning Federal employee retirement eligibility and the awareness that workforce planning is a major challenge that NRC and the entire Federal Government need to address. NRC needs to take further steps to integrate, communicate, and institutionalize its agencywide workforce planning efforts to ensure that these efforts will continue once the heightened attention to this issue wanes. Without such measures, NRC could find itself unable to compete with the private sector and other Federal agencies for staff needed to maintain core competence. Furthermore, NRC would miss several key opportunities that could help to make workforce planning a lasting process.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

OIG recommends that the Executive Director for Operations:

1. Ensure that workforce planning is fully integrated into the planning, budgeting, and performance management process.
2. Establish performance measures related to workforce planning.
3. Develop and implement a communications plan for an agencywide workforce planning approach.
4. Develop a holistic workforce plan that brings together the various efforts underway and tools available to help managers with workforce planning.
5. Use a multidisciplinary team or steering committee to coordinate the workforce plan and to facilitate the sharing of information throughout the agency.

V. AGENCY COMMENTS

OIG provided this report in draft form to agency officials and discussed its content at an exit conference on September 6, 2001. Agency officials generally agreed with the content of the report and with the report's recommendations and chose not to provide a formal written response for inclusion in the report. However, they offered comments pertaining to performance measures, the ERB, and agency workforce planning activities. These comments and views expressed by attending officials have been incorporated in this report, as appropriate.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This audit analyzed the components of a workforce plan, assessed the agency's efforts to date, and determined whether these efforts appeared to be reasonable and sustainable.

To evaluate the components of and provide a definition for workforce planning, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reviewed legislative criteria; guidance from the U.S. General Accounting Office, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the National Academy of Public Administration, and others; current articles on the subject; and practices in other Federal agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, and the U.S. Office of Veterans Affairs. OIG also examined NRC's definition for workforce planning.

To (1) determine whether NRC has the requisite resources and senior management support to carry out and sustain a successful workforce planning effort and (2) identify NRC's workforce planning efforts and the status of these efforts, OIG

- ✓ Examined the proposed agencywide workforce planning budget and other related documents.
- ✓ Interviewed the Chairman, Commissioners, and senior managers in headquarters and the regional offices to assess their level of support for and participation in workforce planning efforts.
- ✓ Interviewed staff in the Office of the Chief Financial Officer to learn about the process for distributing this budget and how spending will be tracked.
- ✓ Identified how workforce planning is expected to fit into the agency's functioning over the long term, for example, how workforce planning will be integrated into the planning, budgeting, and performance management process.

Through this process, OIG determined the agency's involvement in workforce planning. OIG also collected current statistical information concerning the demographics of NRC employees and gathered information on past NRC workforce planning efforts.

Management controls related to the audit objectives were reviewed and analyzed. Throughout the review, the audit team was aware of the possibility or existence of fraud, waste, or misuse in the program. OIG conducted the audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards from March 2001 through July 2001.

The major contributors to this report were Corenthis Kelley, Team Leader; Sherri Miotla, Senior Management Analyst; and Judy Gordon, Senior Management Analyst.

WORKFORCE PLAN COMPONENTS

In its publication, *Building Successful Organizations: A Guide to Strategic Workforce Planning*, the Center for Human Resources Management at the National Academy of Public Administration identified information that is usually included in workforce plans. The Center used the Department of Transportation's *Workforce Planning Guide* of April 1999 as its source for the following:

- ✓ **Action Items.** Examples of actions items include the completion of the remaining steps of the workforce-planning methodology, integration of the workforce data into the strategic plan, and submission of required workforce-planning data to management. Also included are dates for completing action items, and persons responsible for the development and implementation of the plan.
- ✓ **Accountability Information.** Details on how managers and employees will be held accountable, for example, including conducting workforce planning as a critical element in their performance plans.
- ✓ **Integration Issues.** Integration issues relate to items such as union involvement, training plans, recruitment plans, and coordination of gap and surplus issues across the organization's sites and offices. An important issue is integration of the workforce plan with the development and implementation of the organization's strategic plan.
- ✓ **Communication Plans.** Inform employees of the intent and content of the workforce plan.
- ✓ **Critical Success Factors.** Identify those factors that the workforce plan must address.
- ✓ **Agency Goals.** Identify the number of people and types of skills that will be needed to accomplish agency goals.
- ✓ **Workforce Composition.** Identify the composition of the current workforce.
- ✓ **Workforce Needs Gaps.** Identify gaps between current and future workforce needs.
- ✓ **Workforce Requirements.** Development of plans to address future workforce requirements, such as recruitment plans, training plans, and retention plans.